

BEFORE
THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

“SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN OVER THE INTERNET:
HOW THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY IS COMBATING
CHILD PREDATORS ON THE INTERNET”

JUNE 10, 2006
WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
REPRESENTATIVE MICHAEL G. FITZPATRICK,
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, EIGHTH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT,
STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today’s hearing and for allowing me to give testimony on what I feel is a new and emerging problem confronting our nation’s children and their safety while using the Internet. I am speaking of the rapid increase in popularity of Internet social networking sites and their use by child predators to hunt and harass our children at home, in schools and in our libraries.

As the father of six children, I know very well the challenges technology poses to our families. In a world that moves at a dizzying pace, being a father gets harder all the time. Monitoring our children’s use of emerging technologies is a huge task and the Internet remains the focus of many parent’s concerns.

The technological breakthrough of the World Wide Web has been enormously beneficial to society. The Internet has brought communities across the globe closer together through instant communication. It has enabled an unfiltered free-flow of thought, ideas and opinion. The Internet has opened a window to the world right at our fingertips. However, this window opens both ways. The freedom to connect to the world anywhere at anytime brings with it the threat of unscrupulous predators and criminals who mask their activities with the anonymity the Internet provides to its users. And among its many

applications, one of the most worrying developments of late has been the growth in what are known as “social networking sites.”

Social networking sites like Myspace, Friendster, and Facebook have literally exploded in popularity in just a few short years. Myspace alone has almost 90 million users and ranks as the sixth most popular English language website and the eighth most popular site *in the world*.

Anyone can use these sites – companies and colleges, teachers and students, young and old all make use of networking sites to connect with people electronically to share pictures, information, course work, and common interests. These sites have torn down the geographical divide that once prevented long distance social relationships from forming, allowing instant communication and connections to take place and a virtual second life to take hold for its users.

For adults, these sites are fairly benign. For children, they open the door to many dangers including online bullying and exposure to child predators that have turned the Internet into their own virtual hunting ground. I became personally aware of the danger the Internet can pose after my 16 year old daughter began using the social networking site Myspace.com. I quickly realized that while my daughter thought she was only chatting with her friends, other people, some with criminal intent, could be looking in.

Although age limits exist on many of these sites, there is almost no enforcement of these rules. Frequently, children under the age of 16 – the cut off age for a profile on Myspace – simply lie about their age and fake being 16, 18 or even older. Predators also use this anonymity to their advantage by profiling themselves as teenagers to more easily identify and navigate the profiles of their prey.

The dangers our children are exposed to by these sites is clear and compelling. According to a study conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), in 1998 there were 3,267 tips reporting child pornography. Since

then, the number has risen by over 3,000 percent to an astounding 106,119 tips in 2004. The Department of Justice recognizes child pornography as a precursor for pedophiles and is often linked to online predators. According to Attorney General Gonzales, one in five children has been approached sexually on the internet. *One in five*. Worse still, a survey conducted by the Crimes Against Children Research Center found that less than one in four children told their parents about the sexual solicitation they received. Myspace, which is self regulated, has removed an estimated 200,000 objectionable profiles since it began operating in 2003. And while it is difficult to predict the exact number of total predators on the Internet at any one time, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) estimates that there are more than 2,400 active child sexual exploitation investigations under way at any given time.

This problem is finally gaining the public's attention. Look closely at local and national news stories and you will undoubtedly see a story of a crime linked to social networking sites. Recently, national news reports have focused on the case of Katherine R. Lester, a 16 year old Michigan honors student who fled to Israel with hopes of meeting a 25 year old man she met on Myspace. Two months ago, in my own congressional district, a 25 year old man, Shawn Little, was arrested for posing as a teenager online to solicit a 14 year old boy. Little's communications with the child resulted in a sexual encounter. And NBC's Dateline program has brought the threat of online predators to the televisions of millions of Americans through their acclaimed, but disturbing, "To Catch a Predator" series. While these high-profile cases make a splash on the headlines, how many other, less publicized cases of child exploitation go unnoticed?

While these stories have pressured many social networking sites to take action to improve their safety protocols, like Myspace recently has done, these changes fall short of real reform. That is why I introduced the Deleting Online Predators Act.

Parents have the ability to screen their children's Internet access at home. But this protection ends when their child leaves for school or the library. My legislation would

require schools and libraries to monitor the internet activities of minors and implement technology to protect children from accessing:

1. Commercial networking sites like MySpace.com and chat rooms which allow children to be preyed upon by individuals seeking to do harm to our children; and
2. Visual depictions that are obscene or child pornography.

Preventing access to social networking sites in these situations is not designed to underestimate the importance of parental supervision. Internet safety begins at home and that is why my legislation would require the Federal Trade Commission to design and publish a unique website to serve as a clearinghouse and resource for parents, teachers and children for information on the dangers of surfing the Internet. The website would include detailed information about commercial networking sites. The FTC would also be responsible for issuing consumer alerts to parents, teachers, school officials and others regarding the potential dangers of internet child predators and their ability to contact children through MySpace.com and other social networking sites.

In addition, my Bill would require the Federal Communications Commission to establish an advisory board to review and report commercial social networking sites like MySpace.com and chat rooms that have been shown to allow sexual predators easy access to personal information of, and contact with, children.

Make no mistake; child predation on the Internet is a growing problem. Predators will look for any way to talk to children online whether through sites like Myspace, instant messaging, or even online games. The best defense against these people is to educate parents and children of the dangers that come along with the Internet and by limiting access to certain sites during the school day.

This is not all. Congress and state legislatures must also act to dedicate funds to law enforcement programs designed to combat child predators. Last month, I actively fought

for and Congress passed legislation to increase funding to the FBI's Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces and the Innocent Images National Initiative, which serves as the hub for all of the FBI's child predator initiatives. Supporting these programs will send a clear signal to child predators and pedophiles that the hunters have become the hunted and law enforcement will not relent until these criminals are apprehended.

There is no "silver bullet" solution to the problem of online predators. It will take the combined effort of parents, children, law enforcement and the legislature to take action against these crimes. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to address this committee and remark on my efforts to address this important issue.

I yield back the balance of my time.